

RE-THINKING THE FILIPINO FAMILY*

TRACKING CHANGES ACROSS THE YEARS

AMARYLLIS T. TORRES

*All happy families resemble one another,
each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

This overview examines the evolution of the Filipino family over the decades from demographic data, research reports, and survey results. Time and again, Filipino social scientists have declared kinship structure and the family unit to be at the core of social relations in the Philippines (Jocano 1966, 1969, 1975; Mendez et al. 1984; Torres 1989). The family's role in the traditional system has been described as "pervasive" (Mendez et al. 1984), exerting influence on the nature of other social organizations, which have been viewed to be quasi-familial in character. Its importance may be partly explained by the fact that traditional agriculture in the Philippines is undertaken as a family endeavor (Jocano 1969; Torres 1989). Members of the nuclear unit, as well as relatives from either parent's side, are expected to contribute to production efforts, an individual's daily life revolving around this common undertaking. Hence, the family becomes the socialization

*Revised version of the paper presented at the Biennial Conference of the UNESCO National Commission of the Philippines on "Re-thinking the Filipino Family," December 9, 1994, Department of Foreign Affairs Building, Roxas Blvd., Metro Manila.

agent of its offsprings and younger members. Moreover, households are usually composed of nuclear and extended families, and communities are often made up of kin. This helps facilitate the influence of family relations, values, and expectations over individual behaviors.

Despite the centrality of the family as a social unit in Philippine culture, it is erroneous to assume that family structures, relationships, and norms are homogenous across the archipelago. Folkways and mores determine membership, as well as roles and expectations, in the family. So there are no typical families, but a variety of family patterns. Hunt et al. (1987) delineate families according to location (e.g. urban/rural), religion (e.g. Muslim/Christian), socioeconomic class, and nuptiality patterns (monogamy/polygyny/polygamy). Across these types of families, expectations, responsibilities, and privileges of young and old members, both men and women, may differ in some respects and be similar in other ways. Furthermore, family structures and relationship patterns are not static institutions or processes. Rather, changes in the larger community or society and, to a greater extent than previously imagined, in the biosphere also have effects on family formations. Depending on what we wish to examine and how we view current patterns and trends, the Filipino families are in some ways or in no way like those we knew three decades or so ago.

Modernization is a social process which has been implicated in relation to changes within the family. "Modernity" involves changes and innovations in the process and focus of production, or a shift from agriculture to industrial production. This has had consequences on the location of families, with many rural-based individuals coming to cities in search of purportedly better-paying jobs. Thus, one outcome of modernization is migration from rural areas urbanward, especially of young people. Migration alters the family composition and has effects on income, aspirations, gender roles, and youth-dependency patterns. For the emigrant, it means being hired to do work unfamiliar in agricultural society, the development of new reference groups, constant exposure to mass media and their consumerist values, higher standards of living, and rising expectations from the self, the family, the community and society.

Economic and social development policies also have tremendous repercussions on family formations. Land reform, for example, has led to an increase in the number of landless agricultural workers, who eventually join others who move to the cities in search of jobs. The Philippine government's

policy to provide alternative employment to its burgeoning labor force through overseas contract labor has led to the upsurge of single-headed households. In addition, the work available and needed in receiving countries has resulted in the increased participation of lower-middle class women in overseas employment. Structural adjustment has led to the informalization of labor arrangements, encouraging the participation of mothers and their children in domestic outwork and informal sector services. Improved health and nutrition services have increased the probability of child survival and lengthened life expectancy. Population policies, coupled with aspirations for formal education and improved livelihood opportunities, encourage later marriages and smaller sizes of families.

DEFINING THE FAMILY IN THE 1990s

The *family* has been taken to mean *a social unit composed of interdependent members, usually related to one another by blood or consanguinity, and often occupying the same residential abode*. Do Filipino families in the 1990s still conform to this definition? Let us see what demographic and research data tell us.

FAMILY-HOUSEHOLD

Current research describes the Filipino household to be largely made up of families, either nuclear or extended in composition (Cabegin et al. 1993); moreover, there are more nuclear-family than extended-family households. A nuclear-family household is composed of parents with about 3 to 4 children (NSO 1994). An extended-family household, on the other hand, may include relatives from either parent's side or non-relatives (e.g. household help, friends). Extended families in rural areas are mostly composed of related members, while those in urban places include many non-relatives, such as househelp (Cabegin et al. 1993). The 1993 National Demographic Survey (NSO 1994) depicts the family household to include an average of 5.3 members in urban and 5.4 members in rural settings. Often this includes three or more related adults, or at least two adults of the opposite sex, most probably a married couple.

AGE DISTRIBUTION

The average age of the population has risen since the 70s, from a median age of 17 years twenty-four years ago to 20.1 years in 1993. Nevertheless the population distribution remains pyramidal, indicating high fertility levels. The proportion of children below 15 years is also larger in rural than in urban areas, describing thereby a younger population in rural settings (NSO 1994).

HEADSHIP

Most family households in the Philippines are intact units formed by a married couple (Cabegin et al. 1993). Two-thirds of single-family households are headed by males (NSO-NCRFW 1992). Among extended-family households, however, there are twice as many more female-headed than male-headed households: 31% vs. 16%. Male heads tend to be about the ages 45–59, while female heads peak at the ages 39–49. Nonetheless over a three-year period, from 1985 to 1988, the proportion of female-headed single households has increased by more percentage points over male-headed ones. Conversely, the proportion of female-headed extended-family households decreased over the same period, from 40.4% to 31.1%. Also, there is a large proportion of older women heading Philippine households, about 30% of females 65 years and older, and female-headed households are more common in urban than in rural areas (Cabegin et al. 1993; NSO-NCRFW 1992).

From among 454 child respondents in a survey of urban poor households (Torres 1993–94), 6.4% belonged to female-headed households with no fathers, 18% from male-headed families with absent mothers, and the rest from intact families. This pattern remains consistent with demographic data. However, the monitored female household heads tend to be younger than those reported in the general population, indicative of some probable underlying dynamics influencing this observation. Verbal reports from interviewed family members reveal that marital separation is the most frequent reason for forming female-headed households. The second factor has to do with work: the father is working elsewhere, either in another Philippine city or abroad.

NUPTIALITY

Marriage patterns have changed among Filipinos over the postwar years. For instance, marriages contracted before the age of 20 have become less frequent in recent years, with later marriages being more common among urban than rural women. Using census information, the mean ages at marriage of women and men in 1990 were 23.8 and 26.3 years, respectively. The peak years for married females—the age interval within which we find most married women—are 35 to 44; the majority of married males are older, often about the ages 40 to 49. From the National Demographic Survey, the median age at first marriage for city women is 22.3 years, while for barrio lasses it is 20.7 (NSO 1994); in Metro Manila, the median age at first marriage among women is 24. Factors positively related to the age at first marriage of Filipino women are educational attainment and the degree of development of their residential areas. They partially explain why there are late marriages among relatively better-educated women in urban settings.

A recent estimation of factors associated with marriage in rural Philippine households (Evenson 1994) yields the following results:

- 1) increased schooling of sons and daughters affect their nuptiality plans differently: while higher education delays the age at marriage of females, it leads to earlier marriages for males;
- 2) mothers with higher educational levels have sons who are more likely to marry later, but have no influence over the time of nuptiality of their daughters;
- 3) economic opportunities in the communities like higher transaction costs, higher agricultural wages, and better transportation facilities lead to earlier marriages of daughters; and
- 4) among sons, better farming opportunities in the villages lead to earlier marriages and less outward migration.

Legally contracted marriages appear to be on a downward trend, declining to 6.6 marriages per thousand in 1990 from 7.3 in 1980 (NSO-NCRFW 1992). This may mean less people are getting married, or more couples may have formed unions without the benefit of church or civil rites. A related information comes from the proportion of illegitimate births registered in relation to total live births across the years. This figure has doubled from 1970 to 1983, so that in 1992 the proportion of illegitimate

births estimated would constitute 9% of total live births (NSO 1994). In this context, there is an upward trend in the number of Filipinos remaining single: from less than 5% in 1948, to 6% in 1975, and to 7% in 1988 (Cabegin et al. 1993). A greater number of single individuals are now males; in fact, while married men outnumbered married women in 1970, the reverse profile is now the case.

SEXUALITY

The National Demographic Survey (NSO 1994) inquired among cohorts of women (regardless of marital status) about the age at which they experienced their first sexual intercourse. Results include the following:

- 1) 0.8% of respondents aged 15–19 had sexual intercourse at age 15; the rest remained virgins at these ages;
- 2) among females 20–24 years of age, 2% had their first experience at 15 years, 15% at 18 years, and 30.3% at 20 years; more than half retained their virginity;
- 3) among the rest aged 25–49 years, about half started to be sexually active by the age of 21.5 years; only 3% experienced sex by age 15, and 38% by age 20; only 12% of the women in this group had never experienced intercourse.

Hence, it would appear that early sexuality is still not the norm, and that sexual activity tends to begin at the time of marriage of women.

Despite demographic evidence, studies of young adult fertility behavior (Raymundo 1990) place the average age of initiation to sexual activity at 18.2 years among a sample of single and married women aged 15 to 24. Premarital sex was reported by 39% of the young married women and by 2.5% of the single females. Moreover, an increase in early sexual intercourse among the single female adolescents was evident—from 2.4% in 1982 to 6.5% in 1989. Finally, while rural women tend to marry at younger ages than their urban sisters, the latter show a greater propensity to engage in premarital sex. By comparison, a larger proportion of young male adults claim to be sexually active—42.2%. Their partners include girlfriends, acquaintances, and “playmates” (Raymundo 1990). Males who were initiated into sex by the latter two types of partners did so at ages younger than those whose first sexual experience was with their steadies or girlfriends.

Does early sexual activity correlate with early marriage? The answer is apparently "yes" (Raymundo 1990). Respondents' reports reveal that some 90% of sex-related experiences (including probably an unplanned pregnancy) lead to marriage unions. Majority of the young married women were aware that they were too young to wed, but decided to go ahead thinking either that they were ready for marriage responsibilities or that love mattered most at the moment.

Also, the National Demographic Survey (NSO 1994) included information about recent sexual activity of women of reproductive ages. In general, 77% of all women were sexually active in the month preceding the survey. About 21% of respondents were never married. Five percent were abstaining postpartum, while 18% had reasons other than childbirth for abstention. More specific findings on adult sexuality include the following:

- 1) sexual activity was slightly higher among rural than urban women (81.2% vs. 73.5%);
- 2) women aged 20 to 29 are the most sexually active, followed by those aged 30-44, 15-19, and 45-49;
- 3) educational level of women is negatively associated with sexual activity, being highest among women of no education and progressively declining with educational attainment; and
- 4) across regions, the women in Metro Manila are the least sexually active, with only 66.7% reporting sexual intercourse in the month prior to the survey; this value is below the median, and far from the highest reported incidence of 86.4% in Northern Mindanao.

DEPENDENCY LEVELS

The dependency ratio* in Philippine households has declined considerably over the past two decades. While it was set at 94.6 in the 1970 census and 88.3 in 1980, it was computed to be 75.1 in 1990. This can be attributed to an increase in the number of individuals aged 15 to 64 (51% to 57%), along with a decline in the number of children less than 15 years of age (from

46% to 39%) (NSO 1994). The number of persons over 65, however, has increased by one percent over 23 years: from 2.9% in 1970 to 3.9% in 1993.

Data from other research substantiate dependency data from demographic surveys. Children are less dependent on their parents these days, especially in low-income families where not only adults but also children work for the household's survival needs (Torres 1991). Wives have also become less dependent on their husbands for economic sustenance. Since wage levels are so low, an individual's income alone no longer suffices to meet family needs. Instead, women (and their children) have increasingly joined the labor force to help raise the family's monetary resources.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMMUNITY AND THE ABODE

Measures of the well-being of families may be obtained from the characteristics of their dwelling places and neighborhoods, which provide indicators of the quality of interaction between the household and the environment. Across the regions, resources available for family consumption and economic activities differ. A majority of families continue to reside in rural areas (NSCB 1989). There is a general pattern that sectors such as manufacturing, construction, electricity, gas, water, trade, and government services cluster within cities, leaving agriculture, forestry, fishing, and mining as the industrial sectors predominating in rural communities. Because non-agricultural occupations tend to yield higher incomes, the irony is that, while the costs of living in cities tend to be higher than in towns, the incidence of poverty in less-developed agricultural areas is generally higher (BLES-DOLE 1992). On the family level, this means that more rural-based families, especially those from the least developed communities, have less resources for daily life than do their counterparts in the urban areas.

A glimpse into the housing amenities of Filipino households is equally revealing of urban-rural differences in opportunities and resources available to families. Note the following (from NSO 1994):

- 1) while four out of five families have electricity in urban locations, less than half enjoy this amenity in rural areas;

*The dependency ratio is the number of individuals below 15 years of age and above 65 years for every 100 persons between the ages of 15 and 64.

2) half of city dwellers enjoy piped-in water, while only 12% have this luxury in the towns and villages;

3) 2/3 of city-based households have flush toilets, while only two of five rural families have the same; instead, 20% have no toilet facilities at all;

4) wood is a common flooring material in both sites; however, more than half of city families have cement floors, compared to 1/3 of rural families;

5) twice as many urban than rural households own a television set or a gas/electric range; and

6) the ratio of urban to rural household which own refrigerators is 4:1; the ratio is 5:1 in relation to owning a vehicle.

EDUCATIONAL PROFILE

It appears that practically all Filipinos have, at one time or another, gone to school. This experience matches the observation that Filipinos place a premium on education—for both males and females of the household. Close to half of all family members are in, or have completed, elementary school. About a third have gone to or are in secondary school, while about 15% have attained college education. Among the population five years old and above, the 1993 NDS reports that only 8% are without formal education, and only 4% of those between 10 to 50 years never went to school.

The enrollment of schoolchildren in pre-school, elementary and secondary schools has steadily increased over the years (NSO 1990). Between the years 1980–81 and 1989–90, for instance, total enrollment in elementary and secondary schools (both public and private) increased by 3.2 million, or from 12.6 million to 15.8 million schoolchildren. Between the years 1988–89 and 1989–90) alone, school enrollment rose by 800,000 (NSO 1992). The enrollment of children of school age generally does not differ by sex (NSO-NCRFW 1992). When examined by specific age groups, however, we find that there are more female students aged 13 to 18, and more males aged 19 and older. Nonetheless more women than men complete tertiary education. In 1988, 12.2% women graduated from college along with 7.6% men.

HEALTH, NUTRITION AND FERTILITY

LIFE EXPECTANCY

The generation of Filipinos living in the 90s is expected to live 11.5 years longer than those born in the 60s (NSO-NCRFW 1992). In fact, the number of elderly people in the country today has increased by 500,000—from 1.6 million in 1980 to 2.1 million in 1990. Gender differences exist in terms of life expectancy and population proportions, with women observed to outlive the males.

INFANT AND CHILD MORTALITY

On the other side of the coin, mortality rates for infants and young children have declined. Using the NDS alone, infant mortality rates decreased from 51.3% in 1980 to 33.6% in 1990. Some socioeconomic characteristics are linked to under-five mortality figures. Among the higher risk groups are infants and young children from (a) rural areas; (b) depressed communities in Bicol, Eastern Visayas, Western and Southern Mindanao; (c) mothers who have no education; and (d) mothers who fail to undergo antenatal care (NSO 1994).

NUTRITION

From 1955 to 1986, the sufficiency of food supply available to Filipinos rose steadily (NSO 1989). However, food items apparently failed to find their way into many households. Note the following:

1) From 1982 to 1987, average per capita intake of the following foods decreased: cereals and other starchy foods, milk/milk products, and vegetables; and

2) Highest per capita consumption was for sugars, eggs, and, to some extent, fruits. Furthermore, the mean one-day per capita nutrient intake of the Filipino declined for all nutrients (e.g. energy, protein, minerals, vitamins, and fats). This means that many of our children are stunted and/or underweight, as well as susceptible to nutrition-related deficiencies.

FERTILITY

Over a 20-year period the total fertility rate of the Filipina mother has declined from six to 4.1 (NSO 1994). Age-specific fertility rates indicate that fertility peaks about the ages 25 to 29, tapering off at the older ages. Fertility rates have been linked to selected characteristics of women. The 1993 NDS indicates higher fertility among rural women and among the less-educated. It is lower among women in the more urbanized and economically-developed regions of the country. The same indicators correlate with the percentage figures of teenage childbearers, such that more teen pregnancies are recorded in the rural areas among less-educated adolescents.

Practically all women are aware of one or another family planning method. Nevertheless only about 2/3 have ever used a method, while the contraceptive prevalence rate remains at only 40%. Favorite methods include female sterilization, the pill, natural family planning, and withdrawal. In the 90s as well as in the 70s, family planning principally remains a female role responsibility, rather than a shared one.

INTERNAL AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Employment opportunities appear to provide the principal impetus for in-migration to particular sites within the country. As in the past decade, Metro Manila remains the principal destination of inter-regional migrants (Cabegin & Kabamalan 1993). However, other sites of industrial activity have become centers for in-migration as well, such as Southern Tagalog and Central Luzon.

Migrants to urban-industrial sites are principally young persons, and are mostly women. In the 1988 analysis of census data, women outnumber men migrants in almost all age groups, except for ages 35–44. More rural-based women than men migrate, with a ratio close to 2:1. Males still tend to go to other agricultural sites, and may migrate to the cities only after they have married. In the latter case, a man's family may eventually leave its hometown to join him in the city, or his wife is forced to be a female head of the rural-based household. Given these patterns, one finds many rural households bereft of young adult women, but with a good number of older female adults, probably those in their childbearing years.

Women also outnumber men in international migration. In October 1991, 59.4% of overseas workers were females, many of whom were in the age group 20–34 years. While predominantly male architects and engineers constitute the biggest bloc of professionals abroad, women professionals are mostly nurses, choreographers, and dancers. Both single and married persons leave as overseas contract workers.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND BENEFITS

The labor force participation rates (LFPR) of men and women in the households have remained relatively unchanged over the years. About four out of every five males over 15 years are in the labor force, along with only two out of every five women. Despite this, there has been a slight increase in the LFPR of women across the decades of the postwar years. Rural LFPRs are slightly higher than those for urban areas (67 vs. 63). Nonetheless while rural-based LFPR is higher, the percentage share of paid employees is higher in non-agricultural industries, mirroring the involvement of many unpaid workers in agriculture.

From their labor, Filipino families earn incomes which have steadily increased in nominal terms since the 60s. However, earnings of urban families across the years have outstripped those of agri-based households (BLES-DOLE 1993). In 1991, the average annual income of a city-based family was approximately P90,000 compared to only P41,000 for a rural-based family. Urban earnings were obtained from either wages or entrepreneurial activities. In rural areas, families earned income principally through self-employment.

While incomes have risen, so have family expenditures. Compare the average family expenditure of P1,793 in 1961 to P628,583 in 1991. This expenditure level yielded savings of P13,000 in 1991, while average annual savings was only P11 in 1961. Nominally, therefore, it seems that present income and expenditure levels allow families to save considerably more than 30 years ago. But this opportunity is not evenly distributed. Urban families have almost twice as much opportunity to save than do rural ones.

THE EMERGING PROFILE OF THE FILIPINO FAMILY

The Filipino family of the 90s remains much like what it was a decade or so ago in terms of composition and structure. Families remain single or extended unit households, made up of at least a couple and their offspring. A majority remain in agricultural rural settings, living on agricultural occupations and related pursuits, although an increasing number have come to live in the cities.

Family households are, however, being formed at later stages of young adults' lives. Whereas adolescent marriages were not uncommon in the past, the age of marriage has presently risen to the mid-20s for both men and women. Probably associated with this phenomenon of older ages at marriage, the Filipino family has shrunk in size, with an average of only three to four children. Both the age at marriage and fertility decline have been found to be associated with two features of present-day life: urbanization and educational attainment of the wives or mothers. Marriages tend to occur earlier among rural couples and among women of lower educational attainment.

Virginity is still respected in many instances, with incidences of premarital relations still considerably lower than in the Northern capitals of the world. Moreover, unplanned teenage pregnancies are likely to end in marriage, conforming with traditional solutions to premarital sexuality. Nonetheless, the number of registered illegitimate children has continued to rise, along with the probability of informal unions of couples. The notion of "living-in" has become common, if not accepted in some quarters.

Economic opportunities, levels of development, marital relationships, and education combine to slowly change the features of the Filipino family. Intact households, while still the norm, are now joined by an increasing number of single-headed households. Occupations which take one of the parents away from the household, or marital separation, make single-headed households more probable today, rather than death in the family. Temporary migration to local cities and to foreign destinations in order to work is also an emerging phenomenon. What is interesting to note in this respect is the increasing number of young women from intact families who join the trek to the "Big Apple" in search of jobs, leaving the males to continue the work in agriculture and to get married at their places of origin.

The average Filipino family, while highly literate, remains lowly educated, many of its members able to complete only elementary schooling. Health, nutrition, and environmental sanitation around the homes leave much to be desired, and can probably be improved with the installation of public utilities and services in both rural and urban areas. Finally, for the quality of life of the average Filipino family to be characterized by relative affluence and freedom from basic wants, the employment profile of men and (especially of) women has to be considerably improved.

The Filipino family today is better off in some respects from that of yesteryear. In more ways than is desirable, however, it suffers from the effects of a slow economy beset by scarce resources and opportunities for creating self-sufficient leisurely family lives. This is the challenge which faces us today: to be able to rise from poverty and its attendant stresses, and to enter the community of nations as a self-contained state with equity and equality in interpersonal and family relations, with peace, social justice, cultural development and economic growth in our midst, and with dignity and sovereignty as individuals and Filipinos.

REFERENCES

- Bureau of Labor and Employment Statistics-Department of Labor and Employment. 1993. *1992 Yearbook of Labor Statistics*. Manila.
- Cabegin, Emily; Mason, Andrew; and Ybañes, Allen. 1993. "Changing Household Size, Structure and Composition in the Philippines." Population Institute, University of the Philippines. Manuscript.
- _____, and Kabamalan, Ma. Midea. 1993. "Trends and Patterns of Internal Migration in the Philippines: An Update of the 1980 and 1990 Population Censuses." Population Institute, University of the Philippines. Manuscript.
- Jocano, Felipe Landa. 1966. "Filipino Social Structure and Value System." *Filipino Cultural Heritage*. Lecture Series No. 2. Manila: Philippine Women's University.
- _____. 1969. *The Traditional World of Malitbog*. Quezon City: CDRC.
- _____. 1975. *Slum as a Way of Life*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Hunt, Chester; Quisumbing Lourdes; Espiritu, Socorro; Costello, Michael; and Lacar, Luis. 1987. *Sociology in the Philippine Setting: A Modular Approach*. Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House.
- Medina, Belen. 1991. *The Filipino Family*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

- NSO-NCRFW (National Statistics Office and National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women). 1992. *Statistics on the Filipino Women*. Manila: Office of the President.
- NSO. 1992. *1992 Philippine Yearbook*. Manila: National Statistics Office.
- NSO. 1994. *National Demographic Survey 1993*. Manila: National Statistics Office.
- Raymundo, C., and Cruz, G. 1990. "Adolescent Sexuality in the Philippines: Policy and Research Perspectives." Paper presented at the International Conference on Adolescent Sexuality, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, 24-28 September 1990.
- Torres, A.T. 1989. *The Urban Filipino Worker in an Industrializing Society*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- _____. 1991. "The Urban Child and Family in Especially Difficult Circumstances: Philippine Case Study." Research report submitted to ICDC-UNICEF.
- _____. 1994. "Coping Strategies of Female-Headed Households in Urban Poor Communities of the Philippines." *Review of Women's Studies*, 4 (1), 1993-1994.